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The School Health Program in the Soviet Union

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Following my own advice that "experience is the best teacher,"[1] and having a long-time curiosity about the educational system in the Soviet Union, I traveled to Moscow and Leningrad visiting a variety of schools as part of an educational seminar. The seminar was sponsored by the Research Center for the Study of Socialist Education at Kent State University, which has been conducting visits to various Soviet educational institutions for the past 20 years or so. During the trip, the educational classes and sightseeing tours were arranged by Intourist, the official Soviet tourist agency. This agency organized visits to classes in nursery, elementary, and secondary schools and the University of Moscow. During the two weeks I was in the Soviet Union, I had conversations with many teachers and students. Some of these people were selected by Intourist and others I met by accident in a variety of places. The information about the educational system and the school health program in this article is based upon my observations, Intourist guides' comments, conversations with English-speaking Russians, and several other sources.

The Educational System

The curriculum in elementary and general secondary schools appears to be standardized throughout the country. A child transferring to a school 1000 miles away would continue with the same materials he had just left (although such an occurrence would be rare, due to the lack of mobility there). Soviet teachers think our system quite confusing. It was very difficult for them to understand why school curricula, not only varied from state to state, but often varied from school to school within the same community. They felt that our system might lead to learning losses for the child who moves from community to community. They were concerned that a child moving to new schools might miss some important information as the learning sequence in the previous schools might be different. I had to agree that this was sometimes a problem in our mobile society.

In all of the classes I visited, the students were extremely quiet. There did not appear to be any small group discussions, learning centers, values-clarification exercises, or individual creative activities. Even at the elementary level, children were seated in rows. The teachers used primarily the lecture and question-and-answer technique, while the young children answered questions in a polite and orderly manner—quite a contrast to the hum of our elementary classes! At the secondary and higher grade levels, strict lecture is the standard method of teaching. In most elementary classes there are approximately 25 pupils and two adults—one teacher and one teacher's assistant.

In the Soviet school system there are 10 compulsory years of schooling. From three years of age until about seven years, a child may attend nursery school. This is not compulsory. However, approximately 90% of all children do attend pre-school. At age seven, a child enters compulsory schooling.

During the eight years of school, examinations are given. Depending upon the student's ability, he either continues with secondary education or enrolls in the "technical secondary school" for two or three years. Technical schools cover such areas as construction, baking, clerking, and other skilled-labor occupations. The other students, after completing ten years, either go to the "Technical Colleges," which include such occupations as economics, engineering, communications, and laboratory-technician training, or to the "University," or to the "Institute of Higher Learning," which includes training in teaching, medicine, liberal arts, sciences, nursing, dentistry, and the fine arts. Post-secondary education may range from four to seven years depending upon the field of study. To become a primary or secondary teacher requires about four years, and to become a nurse requires about three years at a post-

secondary school. Admittance to the technical colleges, universities, or institutes of higher learning is by competitive examination. Approximately three-fourths of the students at the post-secondary level are on scholarships.

One of the most interesting aspects of education in the Soviet Union, is the "Special School," which may be a boarding or day school. If children are discovered to be talented in an area such as dance, music, mathematics, science, athletics, or languages, they may take a competitive examination and be enrolled in this type of school for the ten year period. At the Special School, talent is encouraged and nurtured.

I visited a secondary level Special English School. Courses in literature, culture, and history of the English-speaking countries were taught in English. The few students with whom I talked, had a broad range of knowledge and background about English-speaking cultures. After graduation from a Special Language School, the students may go to a technical college, university, or institute of higher learning in any field. There is a Special School for each major language. The presence and use of these schools provides the Soviets with a population of people who speak many languages and who work in a variety of occupational areas.

The School Health Program

The school health program in the Soviet Union, as in the United States can be divided roughly into three categories: school health instruction, school health services, and healthy school environment. In the Soviet Union the school health services appear to be well-developed and more comprehensive than those in most American schools. The school environment is extremely neat and clean, though the buildings are quite old. School health instruction and education, however, appears to be rather archaic, and include a focus on anatomy and physiology.

The Soviet Union's program of school health instruction appears to be similar to the health education programs commonly found in the United States about 40 years ago (and, unfortunately, to many existing programs here today). Health instruction is found to exist in bits and pieces in several subject areas and, as opposed to other subject areas in the Soviet Union, is not in a well-developed or comprehensive educational program. As far as I could determine, from conversations with Soviet educators and from the reading of various reference materials and books a "health course" per se, does not exist in the Soviet Union at any grade level.

When I asked Soviet teachers at all grade levels about health courses or topics, they said it was called "physical culture." They explained that in this country students learn movement, gymnastics, dance, anatomy, and physiology. When I asked about specific health content areas, such as nutrition, disease, or human sexuality, the teachers stated that these topics were usually found in science, home economics, biology, and "Character Training."

In the first eight forms (grades), students are given 70 hours of health instruction which is integrated into these subject areas: general information about the human body; the respiratory, digestive, circulatory, and nervous systems; bone and muscle structure; and the improvement of health for people in the Soviet Union. Health instruction appears to be based on the "systems approach" in which each system of the body is studied as a separate unit. Safe street crossing, bus and metro safety, fire prevention, and personal hygiene habits are taught as part of general information. Throughout the schools, various posters could be found on the walls depicting safety and fire prevention and personal hygiene hints as well as aids in remembering these topics.

At the secondary level, anatomy, physiology, communicable and chronic diseases, are studied in biology classes. Nutrition and human reproduction are found in home economics. Such controversial issues as the use of alcohol, smoking, premarital sexual behavior, venereal diseases, mental health, and values relating to politics are found in Character Training which is taught two or three times a week. The purpose of this course is to impart values and ideologies considered important to becoming good citizens. Most topics in Character Training appear to be taught from a "don't do it" perspective. As an example, students are told throughout the Soviet Union that gum chewing is bad for their teeth and that it is a sign of Western Imperialistic Decadence—a good citizen should not indulge in this habit. A member of our educational seminar who reads Russian, spied a poster which had been drawn by students in a Character Training unit. It reminded the student that he should not accept gum from capitalistic tourists, as it was not becoming to a "young citizen."

In talking to a university student at a party, I learned that in Character Training, students were informed that catching a venereal disease was shameful. He also mentioned that if one were to go to a medical clinic for treatment of a venereal disease, it would be reported to his family, school, or place of work (if he were not a student). Consequently, according to this student, there was a lively black market of various remedies to cure venereal diseases, so that individuals would not have to resort to the clinics. He also informed me that he and most of his friends had gotten "the clap" at least once and that it was common among young Russians. A young divorced female teacher, sponsored by Intourist, with whom I talked for several hours mentioned that premarital intercourse was frowned upon and that the major means of birth control was "getting it taken care of" i.e., an abortion. She said that few married Russian women used birth control pills because they were thought to be unsafe. Health topics such as these would be presented in a character training unit to older students.

A teacher, in addition to giving information in a variety of areas of health and other areas in character training also counsels parents who have a "problem" child. If the child is not living up to values considered important to the school or to the society the parents, teacher, and

principal meet in a conference to determine how to solve the problem. Other parents and other students will also help in assisting the child with his "problem."

The school nurse and physician are also involved with health instruction. They hold classes after school on first aid and on prevention of diseases. Older students who learn first aid can become "health monitors." As health monitors, they are responsible for putting up posters about various health topics, throughout the school, and for assisting in first aid care, and for helping students with health problems.

School Health Services

Every school has a physician, usually female, assigned to it. There is a full-time nurse on duty at all times. Each school has at least a first aid room, and, depending upon the size of the community, a medical clinic. Detailed medical records are kept for each student. Two physical examinations are given a year to determine defects in sight, hearing, or other health problems which might prevent a student from fully participating in school life. Treatment is also given at some of the clinics and all medical care in the Soviet Union is free. Most innoculations are given at the school and occasionally special examinations are carried out for particular health problems.

The school nurse is responsible for treating minor illnesses and accidents, under the orders of the school physician. The physician will treat more serious accidents or illnesses in schools which have adequate clinics. If the condition is very serious, the child is sent to the local dispensary. The school nurse also helps the cafeteria prepare a well-balanced lunch for the students. Most students eat lunch at the school though they have to pay for it. A typical lunch might include cabbage soup with turnips, carrots, beets, and potatoes, smoked fish sandwiched between two pieces of brown bread, and a glass of tea.

Healthy School Environment

The deputy director (assistant principal) of the school is responsible for the care of the school environment. This includes its cleanliness, lighting, ventilation, heating systems, hot water, and the arrangements of interior decorations for holidays. This person is also the link between the school and the organizations responsible for supplying fuel, school supplies, and food. The school nurse and physician are in charge of inspecting the school premises for cleanliness, adequate lighting, ventilation, and proper food preparation. They report their findings to the deputy director who takes the appropriate action to correct any problem situation.

I found the schools, though old, to be exceptionally clean. There were several old women in each building who appeared to be constantly mopping and cleaning the floors. The students obediently dropped their litter into baskets and would be scolded by these women for leaving the least bit of dirt on a clean floor.

The school year is similar to ours, with a winter vacation of about two weeks, a two-week spring vacation, and a two to three month summer vacation. During these times the buildings are generally closed and repairs and additional cleaning is accomplished.

Both the Soviet Union's educational system and school health program have advantages and disadvantages, like any system or program anywhere. Certainly such features as the Special Schools, standardized education on the national level, orderly, quiet, and polite students, competitive examination for entry into higher education, and free medical clinics in the schools can be construed as having both negative and positive connotations.

In the process of examining another country's educational system, one can gain insight for the improvement of one's own system. A major problem in the United States today is that many schools only give lip service to health education. Most schools are not teaching health sequentially at every grade level. If a course is taught at all, it is usually presented at the high school level which is too late for affecting attitudes and behaviors. In many of our schools, as in the Soviet Union, health is often considered to be "anatomy, physiology, and the various systems." First aid instruction is often an after-class activity. Controversial issues such as drug use, alcohol drinking, and premarital sexual intercourse are often taught, as in the Soviet Union, via the "don't do it" method. None of these approaches has been found to be very effective in helping students to make health decisions for daily living. Certainly, our country with its many resources, can do better than this!

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[1] Ruth C. Engs, "Experience Is the Best Teacher," *School Health Review*, July/August 1974, pp. 28-29.